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Message Text

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ORIGIN EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-15 PM-05 SSO-00 CCO-00 PA-02
SP-02 L-03 H-02 CIAE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 DODE-00
NSCE-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 ACDA-12 /064 R

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DRAFTED BY EUR/RPM:DJMCCONNELL
APPROVED BY EUR:JEGOODBY
S/S: PTARNOFF
PM:EDNEWSOM
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O 302155Z MAR 78
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY BONN IMMEDIATE
USDEL SECRETARY IMMEDIATE

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BONN FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: NATO, MNUC

SUBJECT: NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL ON NEUTRON BOMB

1. FOLLOWING FOR YOUR INFORMATION IS TEXT OF NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL MARCH 30 ON "NEUTRON BOMB".

2. BEGIN TEXT: THE VIRTUES OF THE NEUTRON BOMB.
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EVER SINCE THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION ASKED CONGRESS LAST SUMMER FOR FUNDS TO PRODUCE ENHANCED-RADIATION NUCLEAR WARHEADS, CRITICS RANGING FROM SOVIET PROPAGANDISTS TO WESTERN CARTOONISTS HAVE HAD A FIELD DAY ATTACKING THE SO-CALLED "NEUTRON BOMB." THE ARCHETYPICAL CAPITALIST WEAPON, MOSCOW HAS CALLED IT, A DESTROYER OF PEOPLE BUT NOT PROPERTY. GRIM FORECASTS OF LINGERING RADIATION DEATHS HAVE FILLED NEWSPAPER COLUMNS WORLD-WIDE. RARELY HAVE THE

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RELEVANT QUESTIONS BEEN ASKED: IS THE NEUTRON WEAPON
REALLY MORE TERRIBLE THAN OTHER NUCLEAR WEAPONS? AND,
MORE IMPORTANT, WOULD ITS DEPLOYMENT MAKE NUCLEAR WAR
MORE LIKELY?

THE ANSWER TO BOTH THESE QUESTIONS IS ALMOST
CERTAINLY "NO." HENCE, THE NATO GOVERNMENTS WILL PROBABLY
DECIDE WITHIN A FEW WEEKS TO DEPLOY THIS GROUND-LAUNCHED
TACTICAL NUCLEAR WARHEAD WHOSE MODEST BLAST AND INTENSE
BUT CIRCUMSCRIBED AND SHORT-LIVED RADIATION MAKE IT
PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE AGAINST ADVANCING TANK ARMIES.
IF THE NATO PARTNERS REACH THAT DECISION--AND WE THINK
THEY SHOULD--THE ALLIANCE COULD ACQUIRE A POTENT MEANS
TO DEFEND WESTERN EUROPE AGAINST THE CONTINGENCY THAT
ITS PLANNERS FEAR MOST: A BREAKTHROUGH BY MASSIVE
WARSAW PACT TANK FORCES THAT VASTLY OUTNUMBER NATO'S.
NEUTRON WEAPONS IN WESTERN HANDS WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY
COMPLICATE SOVIET TACTICAL PLANNING: IF ITS TANKS WERE
TO ATTACK IN MASS, THEY WOULD BE HIGHLY VULNERABLE.
IF THEY WERE TO DISPERSE THEY WOULD BE EASIER TARGETS
FOR CONVENTIONAL PRECISION-GUIDED ANTI-TANK WEAPONS.

FACED WITH THIS PROSPECT, MOSCOW HAS CEASELESSLY
DENOUNCED THE NEUTRON WARHEAD AS A DIABOLIC QUALITATIVE
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CHANGE IN THE ARMS RACE--AND HAS THREATENED TO DEPLOY
ITS OWN VERSION UNLESS NATO DESISTS. THE CHARGE IS
HOLLOW. NEUTRON WARHEADS ARE PRE-EMINENTLY DEFENSIVE
WEAPONS, NOT USEFUL OFFENSIVELY. NATO'S STRATEGY IS--
AND WOULD REMAIN--DEFENSIVE. REGRETTABLY, NUCLEAR
WEAPONS WILL PLAY A CONSIDERABLE DETERRENT ROLE IN THAT
STRATEGY FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, SINCE THERE IS NO
LIKELIHOOD THAT NATO WILL MATCH THE WARSAW PACT'S
CONVENTIONAL FORCES.

THE EVIDENT EFFECTIVENESS OF NEUTRON WARHEADS IS
WHAT BOTHERS MANY WEST EUROPEANS. DUTCH PARLIAMENTARIANS
RECENTLY RESOLVED THAT NATO SHOULD NOT DEPLOY THEM.
THEY REASON THAT BECAUSE MOST OF THE TACTICAL NUCLEAR
WEAPONS NOW IN NATO HANDS WOULD BE MORE DESTRUCTIVE
TO SURROUNDING TERRITORY THAN NEUTRON WARHEADS, NATO
GOVERNMENTS WOULD BE MORE RELUCTANT TO ORDER THEIR USE.
THEY FEAR A LOWERING OF THE NUCLEAR THRESHOLD THAT
WOULD MAKE THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS MORE LIKELY AND
RAISE THE SPECTER OF RETALIATION, ESCALATION AND
DEVASTATION.

YET IT IS PRECISELY BECAUSE NATO'S EXISTING TACTICAL
NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE LESS USABLE THAN NEUTRON WEAPONS THAT

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THEY ARE A LESS CREDIBLE DETERRENT AGAINST THE OUTBREAK OF CONVENTIONAL WAR. AND SINCE SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE CALLS FOR THE EARLY BATTLEFIELD USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN ANY CASE, THE ONLY CERTAIN BARRIER AGAINST NUCLEAR ESCALATION IS PREVENTING ANY WAR AT ALL.

NOR IS THERE REASON TO THINK THAT NEUTRON WARHEADS WOULD BE MORE INHUMANE THAN OTHERS. ALL NUCLEAR WEAPONS YIELD DEADLY RADIATION. THEIR EFFECTS VARY, DEPENDING UPON THEIR SIZE AND THEIR TARGETS. BUT GIVEN

THE LIKELY USES OF NEUTRON WARHEADS, THE NUMBER OF
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PERSONS WHO WOULD BE LEFT TO DIE SLOWLY WOULD BE NO GREATER THAN SIMILAR CASUALTIES FROM OTHER NUCLEAR WEAPONS.

NEUTRON WEAPONS WILL NOT REACH NATO FIELD FORCES UNTIL SOME TWO YEARS AFTER THE ALLIES DECIDE ON DEPLOYMENT. GIVEN THEIR DEFENSIVE CHARACTER, IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHY MOSCOW SHOULD BE SO WORRIED. BUT IF ITS EXPRESSED FEARS ARE GENUINE AND NOT MERE PROPAGANDA, IT SHOULD OFFER SOMETHING OF VALUE FOR NATO'S AGREEMENT TO SUSPEND DEPLOYMENT. PULLING BACK SOME OF ITS TANK DIVISIONS, OR SCRAPPING THE NEW SS-20 NUCLEAR MISSILES THAT ARE TARGETED ON WESTERN EUROPE, WOULD BE GOOD PLACES TO START.

END TEXT.

COOPER

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: TEXT, PRESS COMMENTS, NUCLEAR WEAPONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 30 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: n/a
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
Disposition Date: 01 jan 1960
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978STATE082319
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: DJMCCONNELL
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780139-0039
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t1978036/aaaaaffz.tel
Line Count: 152
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: a6eca1c5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN EUR
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 16 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3307151
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL ON NEUTRON BOMB
TAGS: MNUC, SOPN, US, NATO, NEW YORK TIMES
To: BONN SECRETARY
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/a6eca1c5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
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